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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the meaning and significance of ethnicity, with emphasis on the political role of ethnicity in groups. Information is presented from a review of literature regarding groups from four viewpoints--subjective/behavioral strategies, social science research, ethnographic interpretations, and the culture-population-group frame of reference. All literature is evaluated according to four levels of abstraction for the insights it contributes to an understanding of ethnicity. Levels of abstraction are commonsense perceptions, interpretations of behavior, ethnographic interpretations, and sociological interpretations. General findings derived from these various research approaches indicate that ethnic factors are operative with respect to individuals, population aggregates, and corporately organized groups; inter-ethnic relations between individuals are different from those among groups; ethnic identities influence competitive advantage and/or disadvantage when resources are limited; and all ethnic groups are in competition to monopolize key resources within the overall political economy. (DB)

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Ethnicity: Theory and the Analysis of Political Domains

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John W. Bennett (1975) recently edited an AES symposium which appeared under the title "The New Ethnicity." By way of explaining the title, Bennett (pp. 3-4) noted that it carried a double meaning. It implied something "new" in the world or, he suggested, at least something "newly" recognized by anthropologists. Also, the title marked a shift in anthropological thinking from a "culture-population-group frame of reference to a cognitive and behavioral-strategy frame."

About the time that Bennett was editing the AES symposium, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan were editing a similar work. In its introduction (1975: 1), they declared: "Ethnicity seems to be a new term." They went on to suggest that the inclusion of this new term in the lexicon of the social sciences signaled, among other things, the emergence of a new reality--specifically a pronounced increase in the tendency of people in many countries to assert distinctive identities and to claim rights on the basis of these identities. Glazer and Moynihan (pp. 4-5) also emphasized that the new term, "ethnicity," seemed to mark a shift in the general understanding that social scientists have of ethnic groups. Previously, they noted, such groups were seen as survivals, as remnants of passing traditions. In the early 1970's, social scientists were developing a new conviction that ethnic groups may be forms of social life that are capable of transforming themselves.

Although these comments by Bennett and by Glazer and Moynihan were perhaps intended to be more rhetorical than precise, in their own fashion, they do underscore some of the widespread confusion attending the study of ethnicity in contemporary social science. If ethnicity is truly something "new" in the world, or even if it is something "newly" acknowledge, we

cannot assert this and at the same time claim a significant shift in our thinking about it. To do so would be to admit that ethnic phenomena are not really new, that somehow we have encountered them before, and that perhaps we have not fully understood their nature and significance. Or, if we are indeed coming to a better understanding of the latter, how could we think to argue that ethnicity is something new?

Clearly, polyethnic systems are not new. What is new is the realization that the facts of contemporary history simply do not fit well with the projections of our conventional wisdom regarding the progress of polyethnic systems. "Ethnic groups," Epstein (1978: x) tells us, "have taken a new lease on life when in theory they were supposed to be disappearing." Moreover, this phenomenon called "ethnicity" has given effective expression to the interests of various groups in the political arena of modern societies (cf., Kuper 1972; Cohen 1974; Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Bell 1975; Petersen 1975). Thus, what is most fundamentally new is the realization that social science disciplines must readjust their conceptual frameworks in order to grasp more fully and more clearly what ethnicity is all about.

I

Over the past fifteen years efforts to clarify the meaning and significance of "ethnicity" and to develop a general theory of ethnic phenomena have produced a substantial literature in both anthropology and sociology. It is not possible within the confines of this brief paper to summarize and critically evaluate this literature. Thus, a few points of commentary will have to suffice.

1. Different and contentious conceptions of ethnicity are amplified in the literature (e.g., Naroll 1964; Moerman 1965; Barth 1969; Cohen 1974; Mitchell 1974; Despres 1975b; De Vos 1975; Devereux 1975; Epstein 1978). According to Isajiw (1974) and Mitchell (1974: 15-28) conceptions of ethnicity tend to be either "objective" or "subjective" in their construction, or they combine elements of both approaches. Moreover, Isajiw (pp. 115-17) suggests that these two modes of construction tend to parallel two general theoretical trends in contemporary social science, the structural and the phenomenological methodologies.

2. The "culture-population group" frame of reference, away from which Bennett (1975: 3-4) contends anthropologists have shifted, exemplifies the "objective" approach to which Isajiw and Mitchell refer. In the context of this approach, nearly all anthropological studies have had something to say about the identity of ethnic populations (Berreman 1975: 1) As Bessac (1968: 58) and Mitchell (1974: 22-26) have stated, a culture is the ethnographer's interpretation of the way of life of an ethnic unit. The "cultiunit," defined by Naroll (1964: 283-312), represented a less than satisfactory effort to further "objectify" the ethnographer's interpretation of ethnicity in order to facilitate cross-cultural comparison. Be that as

it may, in terms of the "culture-population-group" frame of reference, ethnicity is reified: ethnic groups or populations exist "out there" as real phenomena. In putting aside this conception, critics (cf., Moerman 1965; 1968; Barth 1969), have generally overlooked that its construction was not intended for the development of ethnic theory: rather, it was intended for the development of cultural theory.

3. Plural theory, particularly as articulated by M. G. Smith (1969a; and 1969c), is essentially an application of the "culture-population-group" frame of reference to the analysis of multiethnic societies. Again, the purpose of such analysis is not the construction of ethnic theory but rather the construction of a cultural theory of a particular class of societies.

4. In contrast to the "culture-population-group" frame of reference, the subjective approach to ethnicity tends to reify and give focus not to the group or "culture unit," but to the identity system of the actor (e.g., Mitchell 1974; De Vos and Romannucci-Ross 1975; Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Patterson 1975; Epstein 1978). Ethnicity is essentially a cognitive category predicated upon the presumption of social, cultural, or biological origins. Membership in such a category is self-ascribed, ascribed by others, or both. Ethnic identities are one of many possible types of status identities in terms of which individuals can effectively relate to others or form groups.

5. In anthropology, the subjective approach to ethnicity is generally credited to Barth (1969). It is instructive to note, however, that an essentially similar approach characterized the earlier thinking of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute group of anthropologists (Cohen 1974: xii-xiv), most notably Mitchell (1956), Epstein (1958), and Gluckman (1960). The work of this group was not primarily concerned with developing a theory of ethnicity

(Epstein 1978: 8-16). Rather, it was concerened with social change and with the meaning and significance of "tribalism" in the industrial towns of the Cooperbelt.

One of the important conclusions reached in the studies of this group was that the term "tribe" carried different meanings in rural and urban areas. This led Mitchell (1956) to postulate a distinction between ethnicity as a structural as compared to a cultural phenomenon. Mitchell (1974: 15-27) has emphasized that the issue here is the analytical relationship between patterns of cognitive and behavioral ethnicity. This somewhat confounds the terms we have been using. To state the matter more concretely: the issue is the analytical relationship between ethnicity as providing the normative (structural) basis for action oriented toward ethnically prescribed ends, as compared to ethnicity providing the basis for a subjectively structured social identity which may be strategically pressed into the service of interests.

6. Glazer and Moynihan seem to consider this subjective behavioral-strategy view of ethnicity new to sociology. However, it was articulated by Max Weber (1968 I: 389-95) as early as 1925. Ethnic groups, according to Weber (389) have no objective existence. They are essentially categories formed by individuals who entertain "a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and emigration . ." Significantly, as Isajiw (1974: 117) notes, Weber took an explicit position on the basic issue behind the question of the subjective as against the objective definition of ethnicity. To the extent that ethnic identities (or categories) assume behavioral significance, in Weber's view, they do so mainly in the political

domain. However, Weber (394-5) also argued that "ethnically" determined social action subsumed a variety of phenomena that have to be distinguished and, further, that the collective term "ethnic" would be found unsuitable for a rigorous analysis of such phenomena. In effect, Weber implied that a general theory of ethnicity simply had no theoretical leg to stand on.

If one wishes to understand the role of ethnicity in the formation of groups, one must seek explanations in terms of more general theories of groups.

II

What might we make of these efforts to clarify the meaning and significance of ethnicity? What do they all add up to? In response to this question, I would suggest the following:

1. We probably ought not make too much of the contrast between the objective and subjective views of ethnicity. The "etic-emic" distinction implicit in this contrast cuts too superficially the interplay of internal, psychosocial, processes and external, material, conditions and factors (Epstein 1978: xii-xiv). For example, as Mitchell (1974: 18-28) notes, the problematic of ethnicity involves at least four different types or levels of abstraction, to wit: (a) the commonsense perceptions and (b) interpretations of behavior by the actors themselves and (c) the ethnographic and (d) sociological interpretations of the actors' behavior in both regards. Each of these levels of abstraction involves symboling and cognition. Moreover, at each level "ethnicity" has phenomenal referents that are sensical or empirical.

2. Most observers agree that the "ethnic factor" represents an ascriptive element denoting the fact that certain people are defined as belonging together by virtue of common origins (E. K. Francis 1976: 6-9). Most also agree that this element can take on a multiplicity of symbols, meanings, values, expressions, and functions in relationship to individuals, populations, groups, or whole societies. Such symbols, meanings, and values may be continuous or discontinuous in the biographies of individuals, in the transgenerational experiences of populations, or with regard to authentic history. Moreover, expressions of ethnicity may reveal varying degrees of normative or structural constraint. Such expressions may range over one or many social domains; and they may be coherent or contradictory in similar or different domains, or at different times in the same domain. In other words, "ethnicity" is a contingent and variable factor in human relations and its precise nature and significance must be determined in each case.

3. It follows from all of this that if one wants to determine the political role and significance of "ethnicity," one must pursue the problem in terms of theories which purport to explain the relevance of the ascriptive element in the organization of groups in the political domain.

III

Against the background of these conceptual views, and by way of drawing this brief discussion to a close, I want to shift the focus to the analysis of political domains. Again, only a few points of commentary can be made:

1. In its political dimensions, ethnicity is perhaps most appropriately considered from the point of view of stratification theory or more general theories of power (cf., Cohen 1969; 1974: ix-xxiv; Vincent 1974; Despres 1975b). However, the "ethnic factor" is not politically pervasive in poly-ethnic systems and it is necessary to keep clear the various levels at which it might be socially engaged and sociologically interrogated.

2. I have stated elsewhere (1975b: 195-96) that the "ethnic factor" may be operative in respect to individuals, population aggregates, and corporately organized groups. It is consistent with most stratification theories or theories of power that these units not be confused. Population aggregates, even when ascribed categorical identities, are not corporately organized groups. By definition, corporately organized groups disclose determinate boundaries and membership, a common estate, a unitary set of external relations, a relatively exclusive body of common affairs, and procedures more or less adequate to the administration of these affairs. In other words, corporate groups are politically organized units: population aggregates are not. It follows from this that ethnic populations are one type of structural phenomenon and ethnic groups are quite another and each type will differently influence the system of inter-ethnic relations that obtains among individuals.

3. Where the "ethnic factor" has entered into the corporate organization of groups rather than simply the categorical identification of populations, ethnicity will assume much greater political significance across a great

many more social domains. However, the key question here remains to be resolved: i.e., When and under what circumstances is this likely to occur? Regarding this question, lines of speculative theorizing appear to be converging more on material factors related to the political economy (e.g., Despres 1967; van den Berghe 1967; 1969; 1970; Cohen 1969; Enloe 1970; 1973; Bates 1974; Despres, ed., 1975; Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Bell 1975) than on the psychodynamics of identity formation or the sociodynamics of status relationships (e.g., Mitchell 1974; Deshen 1974; Charsley 1974; Nagata 1974; De Vos and Romanucci-Ross, eds., 1975; Epstein 1978).

4. In industrial societies, Glazer and Moynihan (1975: 6-ff) attribute the political organization of ethnic groups to existing ethnic stratifications, to the evolution of the welfare state, and to the advent of socialist economies. In both the welfare state and social economies, the state itself becomes a crucial and direct arbiter of economic well-being. Further, because of existing inequalities, the state also has become most responsive to the claims of ethnic populations, thereby promoting their incorporation within the political domain. Bell (1975: 141-74) expands on this theme. Bell argues (145) that where state allocation systems exist, political decision-making forces the organization of persons into communal and interest groups in order for the individual to obtain status and privilege. Where traditional authority structures have broken down and communal groups have become more salient than other interest groups as a result of state allocation systems, ethnicity has become a strategic choice of individuals seeking to articulate their communal interests.

There can be no doubt that in the welfare state as in socialist economies, the state itself becomes an important arbiter of economic well-being. It remains unclear, however, why it is that under these circumstances, ascriptive identities and status claims should be any more strategic in the political domain than claims which attach to status identities that are achieved rather than ascribed. As Cox notes (1948: 318), "political-class and ethnic relations do not constitute ordered systems but antagonistic regimes." The question remains, how is it that the ascriptive element, ethnicity, acquires "structural" force in the corporate organization of groups rather than social class?

5. I have had an opportunity to do research on this issue in Guyanese society. Although the conclusions reached in that work have been stated elsewhere (Despres 1975a: 109-14), they may be sufficiently instructive to justify repeating in the present context. They are:

a. A system of ascribed ethnic statuses will follow upon the differential adaptation of population segments and persist to the extent that the assertion of ethnic identities serves to confer competitive advantage in respect to material resources.

b. Ethnic identities will confer such competitive advantage in respect to resources when (i) the quantity of the resources available is severely limited relative to demand and (ii) the accessibility of such resources does not require individual command of complex technological skills and knowledge.

c. Whenever resource domains vary significantly in the complexity of their technical requirements, there will exist corresponding systems of status ascription and status achievement, and ethnic status claims will mark those populations and resource domains that are most marginal to the economy.

d. The corporate or political organization of ethnic populations is most likely to follow upon any changes that are productive of increased competition both within and across different resource domains.

e. Finally, the differential incorporation of ethnic populations will follow upon the competitive success or failure of one ethnic group or another to monopolize key resource domains within the overall political economy.

These propositions appear to be valid in the case of Guyana. However, their general validity needs to be comparatively established.

In closing, I should like to note that George De Vos (1975: 7) has suggested that "ethnic minorities" have been present as long as sovereign political states have existed. E. K. Francis (1976: 11-18), among others (e.g., M. G. Smith 1969b: 91-152), has argued that the "ethnic factor" stands out even in acephalous societies. From the point of view of this paper, the "ethnic factor" is ubiquitous in human affairs. "Ethnicity is," as Joan Vincent (1974: 377) has stated, "a mask of confrontation." It may be worn whenever material conditions somehow favor the ascriptive element in human relations.

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